

**BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
WORKSHOP
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2007**

The monthly workshop of the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee was held in the gymnasium of Guiteras School, 35 Washington Street, Bristol, RI, on Tuesday, September 11, 2007. The Chairperson, William A. Estrella, Jr, called the meeting to order at approximately 7:27 PM.

Present: William A. Estrella, Jr., William M. O'Dell, Paul Silva, Paul E. Brule, Diana B. Campbell, David L. Dugan, Karen A. Lynch and John P. Saviano; and Edward P. Mara, Superintendent; Melinda L. Thies, Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Curriculum, Assessment and Instruction; and Jane F. Correia, Director of Administration and Finance

Absent: Marjorie J. McBride

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited at the Bond Project Building Committee Meeting just prior to this meeting.

GUITERAS SCHOOL PRESENTATION

Sonya Whipp, Principal, welcomed everyone to Guiteras School –

“the school with a view.” She stated:

“We are fortunate to have the best location in town! We are pleased to be hosting this evening’s school committee workshop. Guiteras School enrollment is 268 students in Kindergarten through Grade Five. Currently we have two sections of each grade. An amazingly dedicated staff of approximately 38 people tends to the varied needs of our students. Our class sizes range from 19 to 25 with an average class size of 22.

22% of our students receive free or reduced lunch. We are currently a Title I school though the decrease in the free and reduced lunch counts over the past three years may jeopardize this status in the future. 6% of our students receive ESL services, 18% receive special education services the majority being speech and language eligible.

As I start my third year as principal of Guiteras School I can tell you that what I am proud of are the enthusiastic and hard working students, the devoted and dedicated staff and supportive and nurturing families of the Guiteras School Community. The strong community that has developed in the eight years since Guiteras re-opened as an elementary school in November 1999 is primarily responsible for the school’s success. Guiteras School was the recipient of a Comprehensive School Reform Grant between 2003 and 2006 which infused approximately \$350,000 into the school. The primary focuses of the grant were early intervention, inclusive education and family involvement. I am pleased to say that we

continue to actively support these goals two years after the grant.

In 2003 Guiteras School's state classification was that of a "School in Need of Improvement-Insufficient Progress". Through the hard work and dedication of the school community Guiteras School has achieved the status of High Performing and Commended in 2006 and High Performing in 2007. As we look to the future our goals include rigorous academics for all students, maintaining and growing the strong level of family involvement and support and striving to meet the needs of the whole child including physical well being."

Mrs. Campbell commented that the "contract" Mrs. Whipp has with families is a great idea. Mrs. Whipp explained the contract outlines the responsibilities she must take, the responsibilities of teachers, and those of parents.

Mrs. Whipp introduced Lane Sparkman, Co-Chair of the playground project, who explained that project planning began last spring by seeking the approval of Diane Williamson, Bristol Town Planner, and the Bristol Police and Fire Chiefs. They secured proposals from three playground companies. They are excited about the involvement of Al Verde, a landscape architect who has volunteered his services. Once the plans are finalized, the group will ask for School Committee approval. Fundraising efforts began on August 26, when \$18,000 was raised; a wine and chocolate tasting event is planned for this winter as well as something in the spring; local sponsorships will also be offered. They feel grateful and confident with the community support

so far. Summer 2008 is the target date for completion. Sherry Charpentier Co-Chairs the project with Mrs. Sparkman and Carrie Ann Marshall Chairs the PTO. Mr. Estrella thanked Mrs. Sparkman for the presentation and advised her to contact Mr. O'Dell, Chair of the Budget/Facilities Subcommittee, to get to the next level.

Susan Donovan, Health and Physical Education Teacher at Guiteras, talked about the fitness initiatives in place at Guiteras including healthy snacks at lunch and a Run/Walk Club at lunch recess, in which three quarters of the students participate; the Club offers prizes for the completion of 5, 25 and 50 miles. Also offered is a Family Fun and Fitness Night where community members come to educate kids and parents, there are interactive stations set up and door prizes are given; they also have morning exercise with breakfast. It is proven that healthier students perform better. The school addresses the issues of rising type II diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol in children by showing students how to live a healthy lifestyle and make healthy choices. Mrs. Whipp announced that Guiteras is one of four RI schools being spotlighted at a "Healthy Schools" breakfast on September 26 which the Governor will be attending. Mr. Estrella said Ms. Donovan is also an active participant in the Healthy Kids Coalition and that healthy snacks have been the rule in our district.

CHAIRPERSON'S INITIATIVES

School Committee Goal #2

Goal #2: Maintain Facilities – Mr. Estrella stated that Warren is down to one elementary facility and Bristol will be down to three when we are finished with this stage of the project. Mrs. Campbell asked that computer replacement be included in the long-range plan development and that the fifth column for “current status” be included in the chart.

Phase II Elementary Facilities Task Force / What Do We Do When Colt Andrews is Done?

Mrs. Lynch, Chair of the Phase II Task Force, reported her committee has poured over available statistics; the ultimate goal is to close Byfield, which is a neighborhood, two-track, high-performing school, and Reynolds, a high performing Arts Magnet School; Colt Andrews will have enough seats for all these students. They are aware of emotions and parents’ wishes to maintain a neighborhood school and the Arts Magnet Program; input from parents is being sought in order to come to a suitable solution for everyone. Mr. Estrella stated that the District has taken no position at this time, Administration will make their formal recommendation at the November Workshop and the School Committee will vote on it in December and parents are welcome to email their comments to the Committee or send a note through the clerk. Dr. Mara reiterated that the District has no pre-decided plans; as of today, there are 449 students in Byfield and Reynolds combined.

Susan Rancourt, Reynolds PTO President, would like to hear Administration's plans so they can react to them; Reynolds is the highest performing school, the only school on the elementary level that represents homogeneous grouping, it has a great staff; they are willing to fight to maintain it. Mr. Estrella stated the plan is to reduce the number of buildings.

Marie Knapmann, a Byfield parent, questioned the difference of the Arts Magnet Program from the rest of the elementary programming and couldn't it be incorporated into the other schools?

Kristen Quinn, a Reynolds parent, has concerns about combining Byfield and Reynolds in Colt Andrews and calling it an Arts Magnet Program—some Byfield parents may not want their children in the Magnet Program and what would happen to the Arts Magnet waiting list?

Mr. Silva said Arts Magnet is in its ninth year, it took three years of presentations to get it approved; he is concerned about preserving one of the major components of involving the community in the town meeting philosophy, and until Colt Andrews is complete, there is not a room large enough to house three tracks of students.

Mr. Estrella commented that contrary to public belief, not all of the high school students fit into one space.

Kristen Quinn said she shared those concerns and also felt it would be helpful to know some of the specifics of what Administration and the Committee are debating instead of speculating what is going through their minds. She asked how the Byfield and Reynolds students could be combined and the Arts Magnet Program maintained.

Mr. Estrella said each School Committee member has their own opinion; Administration will make their recommendation at the November Workshop.

Mrs. Lynch stated she had a child at Reynolds and another at Rockwell—both programs are phenomenal and both children do very well. She believes combining the Byfield and Reynolds students into the Magnet Program is not fair to both the Byfield parents and to the Arts Magnet waiting list families. The Arts Magnet Program has performed and done what it is supposed to and we need to find a solution that is right for both communities. (Applause)

Mr. Estrella believes we should have built a new three-track school.

Terri Moreira:

“My children are students at Byfield School, I am very happy at Byfield and so are my children. We have a great staff that really cares for the students. As parents, though, we seem to have to continually fight for the basic rights of our children as students.

Warren children have Hugh Cole, which is a beautiful, newly renovated school and they are confident of their future in the District. Bristol has two newly renovated schools, Guiteras and Rockwell. These schools have built a strong community and are also secure in their future.

The Arts Magnet Program has carved out a niche in the District and has also created a thriving community. Also, Reynolds was one of the first schools renovated in the District.

At Byfield we struggle:

- We had to share a principal that was not housed at our school**
- Our building is less than optimal, we need a classroom trailer in order to accommodate our entire student body in our facility**
- Then when we did get our own principal and started coming together to create a community, we were threatened with the loss of our principal again. That issue was finally settled and although we are aware of the imminent closing of our school, we were confident that with the completion of the Colt Andrews project we would have a new home and a principal and could start feeling good about our future.**

But now we are again feeling like we are being pushed aside. Our children do not need the added stress of not knowing what the future has in store for them. The majority demographic of our school is low income, single parent families — these children need to know that the administration is looking out for their best interests with a definite

plan for them. You cannot ask them to wait until you are sure everyone else in the district has a home and you cannot wait to hear which parent group can yell the loudest before you make a decision.

The Byfield community needs to be put first this time. We need to let these children know that they are just as important and deserving of the same respect as every other child in this District.

So, in your deliberations and discussions, I ask you to please remember that the children deserve to have their own school, too, one that is beautiful and clean and new-feeling, just like other children in the neighborhoods.”

Charlie Garcia has a first grader at Reynolds. He asked about the Master Plan and the decision criteria, and asked that they be prepared for the next meeting. He asked the number of students in Reynolds – 234; the number in Guiteras – 267 and suggested maybe the Guiteras School could house the Arts Magnet Program.

Mr. Estrella responded the Master Plan was prepared six years ago by Mt. Vernon Group architects.

Mr. O'Dell commented that “you don't take a gem out of its setting unless you have a place for it;” the Arts Magnet Program is a gem. However, we have to look at the dollars and what it is going to cost to salvage the gem. It's been said two buildings will close; there is

overcrowding in Bristol and extra space in Warren. When the bond passed we said we would close buildings and save money—at the end of the \$22M project we cannot say, “Guess what, we aren’t going to save what we thought.”

Michelle Casalegno, a Reynolds parent, reiterated what Mr. Garcia stated. She said parents need to be educated and know what the problem is and what needs to be addressed. They want to keep neighborhood access for all concerned and posed the idea of having the students at the north end of Bristol attend a Warren school. Mr. Estrella said we are spending almost \$12M to renovate two buildings—we are going to close Reynolds and Byfield; Colt Andrews is going from a two- to a three-track school. Mrs. Casalegno said then we are moving away from neighborhood schools and everyone will be reshuffled.

A Guiteras parent said she would be hurt if the Guiteras building was made a magnet building; they would hate to lose it and do not want to be displaced; her children would not handle this well; she begged the Committee not to do this.

Gerard Ruddick, parent of a Reynolds student, agreed with almost all of tonight’s comments, understands the desire for neighborhood schools and the continuation of the Arts Magnet Program as well as the financial aspects. Diversity is good and the Arts Magnet Program is the only elementary school with Bristol and Warren students

combined; it is good to bring the students from both towns together at the elementary level.

Mr. Estrella stated the enabling act passed because elementary students could not be bussed across town lines.

Susan Rancourt commented that we can't look at this from just a financial point of view, we will be tearing kids' lives apart; if we tear Reynolds apart, we will be ruining the community and her children's friends. She encouraged the thought of Arts Magnet at Guiteras and Byfield can stay with their teachers and Reynolds can stay with theirs.

Michelle DaSilva, a Reynolds parent and teacher at Kickemuit, said she is disheartened to hear talk about "us" and "them"; at Kickemuit they are all one and they all work together to do what is best for our children. It doesn't matter to the students once they get together. She supports the continuation of the Arts Magnet Program and hopes that if we expand that program we have the staff that is willing to make the necessary commitment to it.

Michelle Casalegno agreed and believes there is a large population interested in Reynolds; she suggested a survey to determine the level of parent and staff interest in the Arts Magnet Program.

Karen Binder has a child in Byfield and one in Reynolds—each is

thriving and she advocates for both neighborhood schools and the Arts Magnet Program; students and staff at Byfield have had to endure large amounts of stress and she supports Mr. Garcia's suggestion of making Guiteras an Arts Magnet building and the Byfield and Guiteras students going to Colt Andrews.

Mrs. Lynch pointed out that the Warren students in the Arts Magnet Program could easily be fit in to the Hugh Cole building, but it would be hugely unfair to tell Warren parents their students do not have access to the highest performing school. (Applause)

Nina Murphy has a student at Reynolds and is in the Byfield district—she feels strongly about both and asked why we are in this predicament. We have to come up with creative thinking to appease both communities. If this situation had been promoted during the bond vote, it would have had a different scenario.

Mr. Silva responded that the referendum went forward promising a second phase, which included closing both Byfield and Reynolds—this was put to the public before.

Mrs. Lynch said she would never have supported the first bond if the plan included tearing the Reynolds Arts Magnet Program apart.

Mr. Silva said the Committee discussed for years whether the Arts Magnet Program should be expanded or a similar program, such as a

science or math magnet, be developed elsewhere; things change for various reasons over which we have no control. Byfield has suffered a lot of bad turns as has the Arts Magnet Program and it has maintained excellence. In talking about Bristol and Warren students we must look beyond where they come from; Arts Magnet has produced leaders—50% of the student leaders at Kickemuit came from Reynolds. Everyone has their sense of uniqueness. Mr. Silva stated that Mr. O'Dell worries about the money, but he places value on the “gem”; he can find places to come up with the money but may not be able to come up with all the teachers; we have contractual issues with the movement of Byfield and Guiteras to Colt Andrews and Reynolds to Guiteras. Mr. Silva believes the children come first.

John Bento, a Reynolds parent, commented that this situation feels a little unorganized; we need to hold back emotion; parents have issues. He recommended the development of at least three subcommittees—Reynolds centric, Byfield centric, and taxpayer centric—to determine the advantages and disadvantage of each, then come together for discussion. No matter the outcome, everyone will have their say.

Mr. Estrella announced the October 9 Workshop will be at Byfield, the November 13 Workshop, where Administration will present their recommendation, will be at Reynolds.

Mrs. Lynch said there are also subcommittee meetings that are open

to the public where ideas are thrown out before they come before the whole Committee. If groups would like to attend they should inform the Committee so that the location can be selected to accommodate them. She serves as Chair of the Phase II Task Force with members Diana Campbell, Paul Silva and David Dugan.

Mr. Estrella read the following email message he received.

Cara Cromwell, 649 Hope Street, Bristol, wrote:

“I am unable to attend the workshop on Tuesday, so I wanted to write you a short note to share my thoughts on the proposed use of Colt-Andrews. I’m sure you’re going to hear from Reynolds parents – and I appreciate and understand their position – but I wanted to make sure that you heard from at least one other person in the downtown community with a different perspective. I believe that when Reynolds and Byfield are decommissioned, Colt-Andrews should be the elementary school for Bristol’s downtown children and all other elementary students in the district should be enrolled at their neighborhood schools.

I’m sure it was unintended, but the reality is that establishing the Arts Magnet created a lower-tier school in the downtown area – and that school is Byfield. Other families in other parts of town have two good options for elementary schools – their neighborhood school or the lottery system for the Arts Magnet. Because of where we live and a lottery number, we don’t have the choice of sending her to a decent neighborhood school or the Arts Magnet. Instead our daughter is

attending class in the worst building with the worst facilities and has to go across the street for all the “extras” that are included in every other school -- gym, art, music etc. I don’t think that was more apparent than last year when it was (almost) decided that Byfield didn’t even need a principal. It’s clear that the Arts Magnet program has drawn together enough resources, both school-wise and parent-driven – to make it a more desirable school. I don’t begrudge them for it – I think it’s wonderful that the parents and teachers have created such a collaborative and enriching environment – but it is unfair to make this special program available to just a select few.

I cringe when I hear, “The lottery system is fair.” No it’s not – this is a public school system, not a bingo game – my child should have access to the same good programs and equally good facilities as the other elementary school children in the district. My daughter attends Byfield and so far, I’m quite happy – her teacher is wonderful and my daughter is enjoying her days there. But there is the sense – the let’s face it – the reality – that the school across the street is better. The NECAP scores are hard evidence – Reynolds children score 10 points higher in math and 16 higher in reading – that’s a significant difference for schools that are only 20 yards apart.

The fact is that the only fair – and fiscally responsible -- solution is to enroll each child in his/ her neighborhood school and to make Colt-Andrews the elementary school for the downtown area. Whether the Arts Magnet program lives on in any of these schools can be

determined later, but continuing to limit it to just the lucky is a disservice to the downtown children and a misuse of my tax dollars.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.”

Susan Rancourt said parents are afraid a decision will be made and they will “miss the boat.” Mr. Estrella said all meetings will be posted.

Amy Parker, a Byfield parent, commented that she sensed a great deal of tension and feels we should all work together as a team.

Richard Valente, who has grandchildren at Reynolds, said he served on the Hugh Cole Building Committee many years ago; they hired an architect to design the bricks and mortar; he believes we are trying to fit a program into bricks and mortar instead of the other way around.

Mr. Estrella thanked everyone for their input and encouraged them to stay involved.

ADJOURNMENT – 9:34 PM

There being no further business to discuss, Mr. Brule, seconded by Mr. O’Dell, motioned to adjourn at 9:34 PM. The motion passed.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul Silva, Secretary

/c